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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FOREGROUND: AUTOBIOGRAPHICALLY-BASED STORIES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

BY

KATHLEEN MARGARET WALL

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Foreground: Autobiographically-based Stories of Teaching and Learning" submitted by Kathleen Margaret Wall in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education.

Dr. M. Iveson

Dr. J. Oster

Dr. J. Blakey

Date: April 20, 1994

foreground, n. 1. a) the part of a scene, landscape, etc. nearest to the viewer. b) the part of a picture represented in perspective as nearest to the viewer. 2. the most noticeable or conspicuous place.

Webster's New World Dictionary

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents whose enormous generosity, love and wisdom have permitted me to achieve the life I live today.

To my mother, Margaret, who in her multiple roles as daughter, sister, wife, mother and teacher has inspired me all my life. By her example and faith she has provided me with more opportunities than she will ever know.

And to my father, George, whose intelligence, strength and sense of justice will always guide me. He is, without exception, the best story teller I have ever heard.

ABSTRACT

In "Foreground: Autobiographically-based Stories of Teaching and Learning" I have a two-pronged purpose: to look at various approaches to autobiographical writing used in teacher education as a means for teachers to understand who they are as learners and teachers, and through writing stories based on my own experiences, to seek answers to the questions: Who am I? How have I become who I am? and Where might I go? I invite you as reader to join me in my search and perhaps along the way reflect on stories from your own life that have shaped the person you are and may become.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to a number of wonderful teachers I have known over the years. Their influence and effect on me has spanned over thirty-five years from the fall of 1959 in rural east central Alberta, to the present day University of Alberta. One introduced me to using my first pen, nib and ink and one encouraged me to compose fiction on a computer. One met me when I was six another when I was thirty-six. All of them encouraged me to be independent as a reader, writer and/or thinker.

For their excellence in teaching and for their encouragement and inspiration I thank: Helen Martin, grade two teacher; Genevieve Gramlich, grade three teacher; Sister Janet, piano teacher; Irene Gilpin and Craig Benfield, highschool English teachers; Gerald McCaughey and Dr. Greg Hollingshead, University English Professors; Dr. Janis Blakey and Dr. John Oster, members of my supervisory committee; and Dr. Margaret Iveson, my thesis advisor, who first encouraged me to undertake the Master of Education program and who has remained patient and interested throughout.

Finally, a special thanks to Paul Bunner, my husband, who has always expected I would finish this.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. Autobiography: Telling Lives. 1

II. Childhood Memories in Fiction 13

Sweet Time. 14

Black Cafe White. 22

Saved On a Saturday Night 31

Isabelle and Maryanne 40

III. Teaching Memories in Fiction. 51

Gone To Heaven. 52

In Care 61

Letters From Larry: 1987-1992 70

IV. Reflections 83

BIBLIOGRAPHY. 86

CHAPTER I

Autobiography: Telling Lives

> ...I want to explore the proposition that to talk at all about knowledge and the curriculum is inevitably to talk about the self and the manner in which that self makes the flux of experience intelligible. It is in effect to talk about education in its largest sense, whether one conceives education as a developmental process of unfolding or growth, or as an initiation into worthwhile activities. For if all knowledge begins in self-knowledge, or is a function of self-knowledge, then we cannot be said to truly know something until we have possessed it, made it our own. (Graham, 1991, p. 3)

The origin of the word autobiography is found in the Greek language and is comprised of three roots: *autos* meaning self, *bios* meaning life, and *graphein* meaning to write. In its simplist terms, it is the art or practice of writing the story of one's life.

But, of course, it is not that simple. Much

controversy surrounds the defining characteristics of autobiography. Some people, such as M.S. Carlock (1970), have accused scholars themselves of leading to the confusion and conflict. In considering the various views, one sees autobiography as a shifting concept somewhere between what Carlock describes as the strict constructionist approach -- "a specific literary genre that could be defined in terms of purpose, materials, focus, form, scope and length" -- and the loose constructionist approach where autobiography is accepted as any discourse that has to do with the "I". (Graham, 1991, p. 18)

What can be agreed upon by all sides is that the central concern of all autobiography is to describe, evoke and generally recreate the development of the author's experience -- be it one incident or the life itself. It tries to answer the questions: Who am I? How have I become who I am? What may I become in the future? and Where do I belong? Peter Abbs suggests that, "Autobiography as an act of writing perches in the present, gazing backwards into the past while posed ready for flight into the future." (Abbs, 1974, p. 7) It is a search backward in time to discover the evolution of the self yet the conclusions of autobiographies often focus

on the future, the 'Where am I going?'.

The first "deep" autobiography appeared at the dissolution of the Roman Empire with the appearance of St. Augustine's Confessions in 400. (Abbs, 1974, p. 18) Before then the idea of personal history was simply not considered worthy of an author. St. Augustine has, in fact, been referred to at the father of autobiography.

The next great autobiography by a man emerged thirteen and a half centuries later with Rousseau's Confessions. It was written in 1765, published in 1781 and has been credited with ushering in the age of autobiograpy. It was during this time, the Romantic Era, that autobiography was rediscovered and the telling about the self became a virtue. In the decades to follow many writers including Goethe, Wordsworth, Tolstoy, Mill, Stein, Hellman and Nin looked back in their writing to their pasts for understanding and inspiration. (Abbs, 1974, p. 19)

Unlike most autobiographies by men, which reflect the politics of their times or their careers, women's autobiographies have tended to emphasize their personal lives -- family, friends and homelife. Agrippina's Memoirs, for example, from the first century A.D. and Kempe's The Book of Margery Kempe dated 1436, both

concern the personal, especially relationships with other people. Even more recently, autobiographers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Gertrude Stein, whose professions made them famous, have concentrated on the personal rather than professional aspects of their lives. (Jelinek, 1980)

Georges Gusdorf observed that not only has autobiography not always existed, but that it does not exist everywhere. "The concern, which seems so natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it, is not at all universal. It asserts itself only in recent centuries and only on a small part of the map of the world." (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 29) It appears to be a concern specifically in western culture where we delight in our own image and find ourselves worthy of interest. (Graham, 1991, p. 28)

This implies the rather negative concept of narcissism. But rather than the myth of Narcissus, who pined away for love of his own reflection in a pool of water, J. Gunn offers an alternative myth, the myth of Anteus, to guide our concept of autobiography. (Graham, 1991, p.31) Anteus, the son of Terra, the Earth, remained strong and invincible as long as he kept in touch with the earth. (Bulfinch, 1978, p. 121) Perhaps like Anteus,

we too, as both readers and writers, would remain stronger and more controlling of our own destinies if we kept in touch with our pasts, remembered our roots and considered where they may take us.

In the past two decades, the use of autobiography has emerged to redirect both practice and theory in several educational endeavors.

In a number of subject areas, but especially in English language arts education, the use of journals and personal expressive writing has been encouraged along with more traditional forms. Many educators, including innovators such as James Britton, Donald Graves and Nancie Atwell, have recognized that students writing their own experiences, impressions and interpretations usually write more strongly and fluidly, and that when the writing is their own, the technical skills of structure, grammar and punctuation develop more quickly. (Atwell, 1987; Graves, 1983)

Autobiography is increasingly being used in teacher education courses. It is felt that writing about their personal and educational experiences enables students to better understand the kinds of influences likely to affect their present and future lives as teachers. (Abbs, 1974; Butt, Raymond and Yamagishi, 1988)

One wing of curriculum theory has come to rely on autobiography as a means to reconceptualize the field. These reconceptualists, including William Pinar and Madeline Grumet, identify curriculum as *currere* and see it not as a racecourse to be run, which is its Latin root, but as the course of life itself. It looks to the individuals' capacities to interpret, reflect on and reconceptualize their autobiographies. "*Currrere* is an autobiographical process of reflection and analysis in which one recalls his educational experience and examines it." (Pinar and Grumet, 1976, p. 111)

John Dewey's idea of curriculum as experience encapsulates some of the broad objectives of *currere*. He felt that curriculum should not be composed of activities that set predetermined ends or outcomes but rather saw it as a continuous process of construction, reconstruction and active reflection on one's own experience. (Graham, 1992) The focus in *currere* is on the learner too, with a key belief that "curriculum is the collective story we tell our children about our past, our present and our future". (Grumet, 1981, p. 115)

The reconceptualists' idea of reconstructing experience differs from Dewey's in that it has a different objective. While Dewey's notion suggests the

adapting of self to circumstances, the reconceptualists' aim is the slow transcendence of self from circumstances, a regaining of personal control or power. Both, in any case, support an approach to self-realization and autobiographical methods provide this. (Graham, 1992)

Pinar's autobiographical method involves three steps: to write one's educational experience; to understand what principles and patterns have been operative in one's educational life; and to analyze others' experiences to reveal what educational processes or structures are common. While Pinar recognizes objections to his method, particularly ethical questions surrounding its use as a research method, he argues that this method helps bridge the gap between educational research and the actual experiences of teachers and students in educational settings. (Graham, 1992) Pinar (1976) says,

> Educational research as it is presently conducted cannot perform this task. Its focus is elsewhere, on the public, on the visible, and its methods of making sense of what it sees keep it outside the carriage, correlating that, counting this. I do not intend to denigrate the work that is being done by educational researchers; it does a certain kind of job well. But..., it is caught in a vision of reality that while adequate in the past, and for many in the present, is not adequate for the future.
>
> In brief, we have gone just about as far as we can go in understanding the nature of

> education by focusing on the externals. It is not that the public world -- curriculum, instruction, objectives -- become unimportant; it is that to further comprehend their roles in the educational process we must take our eyes off them for a time, and begin a lengthy, systematic search of our inner experience. (Pinar, 1976, p. 4)

Richard Butt and Danielle Raymond offer a new approach to autobiographical research in education that they call collaborative autobiography. As a research methodology they claim it offsets some of the problems of individual autobiography including reliability and replication. This is not a form of co-authorship but rather involves a group of experienced teachers in small groups, such as graduate-level classes with Butt, drafting and redrafting their stories, sharing them and discussing commonalities in theme and experience. This group process is based on feelings of trust and encourages teachers to reveal their experiences and assume responsibility for their own stories. (Butt and Raymond, 1989)

The question arises: why bother doing it? It is Butt's contention that the knowledge teachers have about educational practice and the power of that knowledge to inform practice is undervalued by themselves and the rest of the education profession. Teachers rarely share that deep understanding of their work, nor are they encouraged to do so. The result is

that the profession hasn't acquired a collective body of knowledge based on individual contributions.

Practicing teachers often ignore research because most of it has not been written for them and appears to contribute little to improving their own teaching. Reseachers seem out of touch with teachers and teachers seem out of touch with researchers. Butt's collaborative method is perhaps one way to bridge that gap between theory and practice. (Butt and Raymond, 1987-88; Butt and Raymond, 1989; Butt, Raymond and Yamagishi, 1988)

Clearly Butt believes that who we are as people -- how we learned our life lessons, from what people and experiences we learned those lessons, what we value and how we share those values and what we disregard and dismiss as unworthy -- affects who we are as teachers. And what we survive with as individuals, even from early childhood, is reflected in our teaching.

Butt and Raymond's approach to collaborative autobiography involves the group of experienced teachers working together over time through four phases of activity and writing. The four pieces of writing include a depiction of the teachers' current working realities, a description of their current pedagogy and curriculum-in-use, an account of their reflections on their past personal and professional

lives insofar as they might relate to an understanding of present professional thoughts and actions, and a projection into their preferred personal and/or professional futures.

All members of the group share excerpts of exploratory writing. There are no assigned topics; participants have complete control over what they choose to disclose about their personal and professional lives. Everyone asks questions and shares points of similarity and difference in experience -- the object being to gain a deeper understanding of each presenter and to help individuals clarify their own understandings. The essential conditions of the course include making "I" statements, describing and identifying feelings, being frank and honest about oneself, engaging in non-critical acceptance of others and of course, providing confidentiality. All give and receive and are learners and educators in the group. (Butt, Raymond and Yamagishi, 1988)

Does it work? In the few years since Butt and Raymond began using this method with teachers there remains no empirical evidence that it does. However, in answer to the question, Jim Paul, (Faculty of Education, University of Calgary) who has studied with Butt and participated in his class, stated, "Everyones' lives change for the better after Butt's course." In an interview in 1992, he said, "Butt wants teachers to tell stories to prove they are human -- as human

as kids. If you don't, you remain a technician. Who you are in and out of class must be similar." He added, "You can't face teaching unless you know who you are and how to change or adapt. Through autobiography, you come to understand your teaching and learn to be positive about yourself."

My own experience taking Butt's collaborative autobiography course in 1993 left me in enthusiastic agreement with Paul. Through my writing, I came to an understanding of the roots of my learning and practice as a teacher. But further, I desired to take the bones of some of these experiences and build stories around them that could be shared with other teachers and learners.

Autobiographical fiction has been described as "...mysterious to the point of being an oxymoron." (Morgan and Hall, 1991, p. xiv) I begin this mysterious autobiographical journey to discover the facts, facticities and fiction in my own writing. The following pages contain some of the stories grown from my autobiography -- the real people, places and events of my childhood and teaching. Yet they are fiction -- with imaginary characters, settings and plots.

They are not lies. They are not facts. Perhaps they are, as Janice Morgan has said in decribing works of Nabokov and Maxine Hong Kingston, my attempt to "...negotiat(e) between

event and illusion, the actual and the imaginary, where myth, allegory, and lived experience combine in complex interdependent patterns to form ...the 'authenticity' of [my]self." (Morgan and Hall, 1991, p.6)

By fictionalizing my stories I am permitted as an author and teacher a distancing from the personal to the public. I have the luxury and obligation to interpret and enrich these experiences of my childhood and teaching so that the people, places and times, and the images and themes become more readable, recognizable and universal for the reader.

It is a shifting of the foreground from autobiography to fiction -- a shifting to the stories themselves.

CHAPTER II

Childhood Memories in Fiction

The following four stories arose from times, people and places of my childhood. I welcome these memories. Perhaps the reader too has such stories to welcome from the past.

Sweet Time

Claire stood near the doorway of the visiting room in the extended care wing and adjusted to the grief she always felt when coming to see Aunt Doris. On the far side of the room, surrounded by tropical plants and carefully arranged groupings of pastel watercolors, she saw her aunt staring at the organized wall of pines growing outside the window. Her head was now permanently welded at an angle by arthritis and her hands, once familiar with delicate needlework, vigorous gardening and milking cows, lay twisted and frozen useless on the padded arms of the wheelchair.

"Hello, Aunt Doris." Claire placed the plastic container on Aunt Doris's lap and leaned to kiss her dry and translucent cheek.

"Hello, honeychild." Aunt Doris smiled and glanced at the container. "What have you got here?"

"Wait. It's a surprise. Close your eyes."

* * * * *

Claire followed the worn cowpath through the coulee and up to the high ridge. The milkcows, Pansy and Daisy, stood surrounded by buckbrush down in the far-south corner of the pasture. "Hey! Come on!" she shouted. "It's time for milking, you stupid cows." They turned towards her indifferently and began their languid ascent of the ridge. She waited.

In the spring, when her parents went to England for a few months, Claire had come to live with Aunt Doris on her ranch in the Neutral Hills. Except months meant nothing to her, she didn't understand England and in time decided she would stay with Aunt Doris her whole life. Uncle Frank had been dead so long that Claire couldn't even remember him.

Aunt Doris encouraged Claire to take responsibility for certain chores. She was plenty big enough, Aunt Doris said. Each morning she filled the empty syrup pail with

warm eggs from the chicken coop and in the evening, before supper, she brought the milkcows home for milking. Aunt Doris told her it was good to have Claire get the cows because her own legs were getting too old to climb the ridge.

"But it's too boring sitting up on the ridge like a bump on a log, waiting for the cows to climb," said Claire. "Even if you yell at them or go down to hurry them up, they don't go any faster."

Aunt Doris said you mustn't hurry the cows before milking. "They have to take their own sweet time coming home because otherwise the milk will go sour or you'll get diddley-squat in the bottom of the milk pail." She said that Claire must take her sweet time too when she waited for the cows. She told her to take a syrup pail with her to get the cows and during the sweet time find something from the prairie to bring back down to share.

"There's diddley-squat to find up here!" Claire shouted to a gopher the first time she stood on the ridge with the syrup pail. Gazing at the puffy clouds pushing and shoving their way across the purple-red sky to the edge of the earth, Claire fantasized taking a pailful of the sky home or, like a magician, capturing the sounds of the birds. She smiled and imagined carrying home a pailful of the wind to release in Aunt Doris's kitchen.

"There's nothing here but the sky!" She drop-kicked the pail in disgust sending the gopher scurrying into its hole. The pail clinked noisily against a lump on the ground. It was a stick, just like any stick you'd find down by the creek, only this was so hard Claire couldn't even break it.

Aunt Doris was thrilled. She told Claire that long ago, before anyone could even remember, the Neutral Hills were covered with a big sea and lots of huge trees. But things changed, the trees and animals died from cold weather and the sea disappeared. The stick Claire found was from one of those big trees and it was so old it had actually turned into a rock. It was called petrified wood, Aunt Doris said.

After finding the old wood, Claire looked hard for special things to take Aunt Doris and the prairie never disappointed. In the spring, the pail filled with the gentle violet of the crocuses, which Aunt Doris placed in teacups all over the house. They gave way in turn to wildroses, buttercups, bluebells, buffalo beans and brown-eyed susans. She found cacti with big pink flowers on them, bird's eggs and coloured feathers and twice she found rocks with fishbone prints in them. Aunt Doris said those fish had also lived, like the trees, when the ridge was covered with the sea and now they were called

fossils.

Sweet time became the best time of day for Claire and she told Aunt Doris that the prairie was the best place to be on the whole earth. Aunt Doris agreed.

Claire brought the cows home for the last time late in the fall. Aunt Doris fed them in the corral during the winter because there wasn't enough to eat in the pasture and the slough froze over.

Claire hoped Daisy and Pansy would take a long time climbing the ridge. She lay face down on the stiff grass to wait for them. The air was chilly with the warning of winter and the wind sent shivers up her back. She tucked her arms under her chest. The grasses tickled her nose and she breathed deeply. She had found nothing to take Aunt Doris and the syrup pail sat empty by her side. The flowers had shrivelled long ago and no interesting stones, sticks or bird feathers had shown themselves. Claire rolled onto her back and wiped her running nose on the back of her hand. She reached for a piece of prairie sage and crushed and rolled it between her fingers. She again sniffed the prairie smell on her hands, her sleeves and her hair.

The cows finally appeared and bawled questioningly at her from the path. Claire sat up, "You guys just

wait," she said and reached for her pail. Claire began carefully picking at the dusty brown clumps of sage. Aunt Doris always said when you pick flowers from the prairie you must leave the roots in the ground so they had a place to begin the next year. She said you could never be greedy and take the whole thing.

"What did you find for me today, honeychild?" Aunt Doris was peeling potatoes over a bowl of water at the kitchen table when Claire came shivering into the house.

"Mostly everything's gone. I just brought you something to put on the fire." Claire rubbed her red hands together over the big woodstove.

"Well, let's have a look in the pail."

Claire climbed onto Aunt Doris's knee and pried the lid off.

"See. I told you." Claire wished she hadn't brought anything.

"For Heaven's sake, you've brought me the prairie itself!" The pail was full with the crumbling pieces of prairie sage. "And you know, you can use it in the fire," she said. "But not for kindling."

Claire followed to the stove where Aunt Doris crumbled a handful into the fire. "Now close your eyes and tell me what you smell."

Claire sat on the linoleum in front of the big black woodstove with her eyes closed. A familiar fresh and pungent odor filled the room. "The prairie, Aunt Doris." Claire whispered. "I can smell the prairie."

Sometimes that fall Aunt Doris would say, "Do you think we need a bit of the prairie today?" And she would put a handful of prairie sage on the fire or mix it with water in a tin can to brew at the back of the stove. "All you have to do is sit back, close your eyes, and put yourself on top of the ridge. Imagine it's that sweet time of day before coming home."

Sometimes she would shake a little bit in the bathwater so at night Claire's skin would smell like the wind and her dreams would fill with the songs of the birds, giant green forests and swimming in the sea of the ridge, on a purple-red sunset evening.

* * * * *

Claire took the container from Aunt Doris's knee. "Are your eyes still closed?" Aunt Doris leaned back in the wheelchair and smiled.

Claire filled the little brass incense burner and

struck a match. "Now tell me, what do you smell?"

Aunt Doris sighed and inhaled deeply, taking her own sweet time.

Black Cafe White

Ma Chang always ran the cafe. The big tin Coca Cola sign that shrieked in the wind above the door called it the Black Cafe White but we all knew it as Changs'. It was the only cafe in town since the hotel burned down. Leadley had one grocery store, a garage, a hardware, five elevators and the pool hall (which didn't count because kids weren't allowed). So Changs' was the place to go when you had money and your parents would let you. Ma Chang had been open every day of the week for as long as I could remember.

She had a husband named Fred. He ran a fancy restaurant about thirty miles away in Clarence. Every once in a while, though, he'd show up to see what was going on. You could hear them in the back yelling at each

other in Chinese. He never waited on customers. There were hardly any anyway because nobody bought much there except candy, pop, or maybe some coffee.

Sometimes a stranger would be in there eating a meal and us kids would tell him that she used cats instead of chickens and that she never washed her hands.

After Fred would leave, Ma Chang always had a black eye or something. I think he beat her up because she never made enough money for him. It wasn't really her fault because she was always open. She just didn't sell much.

What you'd do is bang your nickel on the glass-top counter when you wanted something. She'd come shuffling out of the back not saying a word. When she squatted down you could see her wrinkly old arm pointing from one box to the other until you said yes. That's how she knew what you wanted. She never really spoke any words in English.

Ma Chang would count out your fifteen jawbreakers, fifteen nigger babies, or five bubblegums slowly, with her dirty looking hands. We'd have to wipe things off on our pants before we ate them.

She had three pretty rings and two gold bangles that she always wore. When you watched her hands in the candy counter you could get a good close look at them. Fred

maybe gave them to her when they were young and he liked her.

Ma Chang was really little, even for an old lady. She always wore that same black dress, with a full red paisley apron. She had those black, cloth, Chinese slippers with no backs, embroidered with a fiery serpent on the toe. She could get a real nice slap-slide sound walking from the kitchen. I practiced the slap-slide with my new rubber thongs, exaggerating her tired, bent-over old walk. I never did get it right, but like Will, my twelve-year-old brother, said, "She's old and has likely worn shoes like that all her life." It's true, I never saw her wear anything but those slippers, even in the winter time.

If you only had ten cents you just got the pop, but for fifteen you could get a tall Coke float in a glass with a stem on it. Ma Chang gave you one big scoop for five cents. She wasn't cheap.

Usually we'd take our floats to the black and white wooden booths with the tall backs. Nobody could see over the backs unless they stood up. It was very private and nobody could listen in. Sometimes the high school kids would even be kissing in the back booth and they would play music on the juke box. They were mean to Ma Chang a

lot of the time, though, and would really get her yelling. They'd play bowling with pop bottles and a hockey puck or something, and if they broke a bottle they wouldn't give her the two cents deposit even though they were the ones who broke it.

Liverlips Wilson was the meanest of all. He had big blue lips because he had a heart operation when he was little. He was also really stupid and had failed grade nine twice. He would come in with a slimy smile on and say things like, "Hello Ma, you ugly old bitch!" All his friends would laugh.

"I wanna Coke, you fat sow." She would just get the pop, not knowing what he was saying.

"Here, catch!" he'd say and throw his money so that it would roll off the counter and onto the floor. She'd have to kneel down to get it.

The summer I turned ten Ma Chang broke her wrist. She still kept the restaurant open but she couldn't do much work. I wished I hadn't told my Dad about it though, because the next day he took Will and me down to the cafe and made Ma Chang understand that we would come down every day and help her move freight and clean up. We didn't like it one bit. It was embarrassing.

Mostly we were able to do it just before supper when the other kids were home. But one night Liverlips came by and caught me sweeping. He grabbed the broom out of my hand and said, "Workin' for a Chink now are you?"

"What's it to ya, Liverlips?" I wasn't scared of him.

"Don't you ever call me that again, you little shit!" He pushed the broom into my face.

Just then Will caught him behind the knees with the mop. He crumpled. "Bunch of Chink lovers," he snarled.

"Get outa here, you big asshole, or I'll tell your old man you pick on little kids and old ladies." Liverlips' Dad was a preacher and he was an asshole too.

We had just finished our work when I found it. "Will, look at this!" In the bottom of the broom closet was a newspaper. Except this was a real Chinese newspaper with funny marks that went all up and down in lines.

"What does it mean?" I turned it all directions. We giggled, and Will put on a real Chinese-sounding voice, squinted his eyes and pretended to read it.

We looked at Ma Chang at the same time and knew we were being mean. "I'm sorry Mrs. Chang," said Will.

She started talking Chinese to us while getting some

paper and ink out of a drawer. She didn't want us to leave, even when I pointed at the clock to show her it was time. She just sat at the table and got out this big, long paintbrush with a pointy end.

"What's she doing anyways, Will?" I whispered.

"Just shut-up and watch."

She began to make these really pretty black strokes on the white paper -- just like the newspaper marks only nicer. She pointed at Will and made some criss-cross marks. She pointed at me and made another kind. She did the table, the chair, a cup and the broom. I drew a tree and she made a sign. Will drew a cat and she made that too. Ma Chang had a different sign for everything we drew. Then she let us try it.

She let us take the papers home and we hung them on the fridge. "Well you see," I told Mom, "they aren't really words like our words, but that's what they use in China."

One time she showed us some pictures of Chinese people wearing funny looking clothes. And one of her and Fred when they were young, with some little kids. All she said was, 'home' and 'China', over and over.

Ma Chang got her cast off not long after that so Will and I didn't have to help her anymore. Still,

sometimes we'd go in and get her to show us those Chinese words again. Sometimes she'd give us four for a penny on jawbreakers instead of three.

Liverlips' Dad decided by the end of the summer that the reason his boy was so stupid was because of the teachers. And the reason he was always in trouble was because of his bad friends. Liverlips got sent to Edmonton to a Christian school. I was glad. Will and I figured that with him gone, Ma Chang might have an easier time of it.

That last day of summer, Will and I had to pick off all the corn, and after supper, peel the whole works. Mom said if we finished by nine o'clock, we could go down to Changs' and get two pops. She said she'd even make popcorn.

It was getting dark and we were the only ones on main street. The streetlights were buzzing blue and the odd bat whipped through the light for a bug. Will killed a big June bug in front of the Anglican Church. It was longer than my finger.

Nobody was in Changs' and the screen door banged loudly behind us. Ma Chang had oiled the floor that day and the heavy pine smell wrinkled our noses.

Will banged the quarter on the counter and we waited.

"Maybe she's in the toilet, Will." I heaved my body up and rested on my elbows on the counter. My toes dangled down against the glass.

"Mrs. Chang!" Will hollered towards the kitchen.

"She's likely out back." I walked to the end of the S-shaped red counter and stood on a stool so I could see through the glass in the swinging kitchen doors. I had to stand right on the counter to see all the way to the back of the restaurant.

She was there.

"Will!" I screamed. "Come here, quick!"

He bounded up beside me on the counter and together, through the little windows, we could see Ma Chang lying in a heap beside the back door.

We ran through the kitchen and stood staring at Ma Chang. She was groaning and her face was all bloody. "Go get Dad." Will spoke through his teeth. I was hanging on to his arm as tight as I could. Her dress was up over her knees and one slipper had fallen off.

"Will, I'm scared."

"Just get him!" He was crying and he pushed me hard towards the front.

I cried and ran harder than I ever had in my life.

Dad got the car and he and Mom drove to the cafe. Will came home on foot and said they had taken her to the hospital in Clarence.

Ma Chang didn't return to Leadley after that and I never saw her again. Changs' Cafe never reopened either and eventually they removed the big Black Cafe White sign and the building was turned into a senior citizens' centre.

I used to wonder what happened to Ma Chang. Maybe she got to go back and live in China with her old friends. Maybe she found her kids to take care of her. I hope she never had to go live with Fred.

Saved On a Saturday Night

"CHOOSE GOD! COME TO CHRIST!" Pastor Glen barked orders from the stage of the tightly packed Leadley Community Hall. We one and all felt pressed by the weight of his words and the sweltering heat of a prairie evening in August. The overweight women in their shiney good dresses, the men with sunburned necks stuffed into tight shirt collars above heavy black suits and the whining children were all, like me, restless for relief.

Our town had five churches -- one for about every fifty people in the district -- and generally, there wasn't much mingling of the congregations. The Community Hall setting however, considered neutral turf by all, had caused Lutherans, Uniteds, Anglicans and Catholics to set aside summer haying and their personal preferences in

faith, to join the hosting Pentecostals for this religious revival meeting.

"Yes!" Pastor Glen intoned. "Say, 'Yes God, I choose YOU!' I choose Christ for my Lord and everlasting personal Saviour."

Most of the other kids sat at the front, but I'd been late and was stuck sitting about three-quarters of the way back with the adults. I strained to see the stage between their shoulders where Pastor Glen stood at the microphone and Miss Velma perched and smiled from the electric organ brought in just for the occasion.

I hadn't really come to hear about God. I came to see Miss Velma and Pastor Glen -- people right off television -- and if I'd heard correctly, actually walk up to the front and get to meet them. They were sort of like movie stars. They had a kids' T.V. show every Monday after school that year, 1962. They made it right in Red Deer. It was about God and Christ and singing and sharing.

To be honest, I didn't care so much about being God's Little Helper, or sharing with my friends. What I did care about was the beautiful Miss Velma and the handsome Pastor Glen.

Most of the time the picture was quite fuzzy. I used

to think it must mean a storm was happening outside the station. But Dad said that once they got the bugs worked out of the new booster tower, there wouldn't be so much snow. They'd recently erected the tower in the Neutral Hills and quite a few families already had sets.

Still, even with the fuzziness, anybody could see just how glamorous Miss Velma was. In black and white, you never knew what color her dresses were, but they were tight fitting, narrow at the knees and clearly showed her large, pointed breasts. She wore high spiked shoes and took dainty little steps around the organ. She played it every week on the show, and always kicked off her shoes before launching a hymn sing. Miss Velma's hair was dark and usually worn swept up in a beehive. Or sometimes, like Jackie Kennedy, she backcombed it into a bouffant which sat around her head like a large globe.

"Now boys and girls," she would whisper her words. "Remember, Miss Velma says to share."

Pastor Glen was very handsome -- smooth and elegant and always dressed in a suit. But it was his voice, his real-live voice, I went to hear at the revival meeting. It didn't seem to matter what he said; his voice would plunge and soar like a hawk on a summer day. He sang songs on the show, and always ended with a talk about

serious matters such as how even boys and girls had a duty to help do God's work.

"Choose GOD! It's easy enough, ladies and gentlemen." Pastor Glen paused and gripped his forehead with one hand as though tired of trying to explain it to us. He glanced up towards the lightbulb dangling above his head and then piercingly at the audience.

"I KNOW there are unsaved sinners out there!" The microphone shreiked a brief objection.

Pastor Glen calmly adjusted the amplification, leaned forward on the lectern and smiled disapproval down at the assemblage. "Some of you have loved ones out there who are NOT SAVED! You have friends and relatives who are living for the DEVIL, working for the DEVIL, every day of their LIVES!" His accusation hit me like a stick. "PRAY FOR THEM!"

A tired misery settled on the crowd as we silently considered our sinning relatives and friends.

My own uncle proudly claimed he never went to church unless someone died or got married. My Dad declared he was a 'Free Thinker', and even stated so on the official government forms that asked, 'What's your religion?' My very mother, the organist in the Anglican church, had missed more than a couple of Sunday services during that

summer.

"PRAY FOR THEM!" Pastor Glen repeated.

We collectively hung our heads and fidgeting nervously began our prayers. My legs were weak with the weight of ten years of my own personal sinning. Most recently, I'd set fire to the hired man's new jacket, by accident of course, but nonetheless he told me, along with a few other things, that I could go to Hell.

I sneaked a peak around the room and wondered if God would be able to sort out who was saying what with so many of us all talking to him at once. Old Mr. Larson's lips were moving energetically I saw, and probably in Norwegian.

Finally, Pastor Glen broke the gloom. "Let us all rise and sing to the glory of Christ our Saviour." He nodded to Miss Velma, who kicked off her highheels and wiggled around in her blue taffeta dress to face the keyboard. We rose.

> Shackled by a heavy burden,
> Neath a load of guilt and shame,
> Then the hand of Jesus touched me,
> and now I am no longer the same.

The Pastor's sonorous tenor and Miss Velma's angelic soprano carried our weak spirits and voices high above selfish concerns.

He touched me,
Oh, He touched me,
And, oh, the joy that floods my soul.
Something happened, and I know
He touched me
And made me whole.

Old Mrs. Larson dabbed at her cheeks and eyes with a handkerchief. I wondered what more she could do for God. She was our chicken lady. Every time she slaughtered she brought around her tin washtub full of chickens, each wrapped carefully in a clean checkered tea towel, to sell to my mother. Only the previous week she had told us that she sold the chickens for God so that Mr. Larson could send his old age pension to Pastor Glen's ministry. "The old fool," my Dad had later said.

"How many here can say," Pastor Glen pointed his finger at the still-standing audience, "'Pastor, I am saved for sure and forever?' How many can say, 'I know Christ is my personal Saviour and I can sit right down here now because I know I am saved for sure and forever.'?" His voice circled and hovered above us. "That's right. Sit down. If you can."

No one sat. No one was sure.

"How many of you here could not sit down? Could not sit down because," he paused and shouted, "YOU AREN'T

SURE!"

"You aren't sure." He repeated.

I sneaked a peak at the others. How come the old Larsons weren't sitting? Why wasn't Mrs. Zwicker, the grade one teacher who never raised her voice, sitting?

"To you, dear Lord, our heads are bowed and Miss Velma and I are standing by. I want to ask each and every one of you who want salvation today, who want to REDEDICATE YOUR LIVES TO CHRIST today, who want to join with us today with an offering, to COME FORWARD! I want you to step out and come right up to the front. That's right. Come right up to the front and BE SURE! BE SAVED!"

Miss Velma grabbed a tin pie plate for the collection and she and Pastor Glen stepped down from the stage to greet and save the winding procession of woeful sinners that began to file by, one by one. Her voice rose in faith and hope and the audience, without the reassuring rhythm of the organ, joined the singing somewhat plaintively:

> Shall we gather at the river
> Where bright angel feet have trod,
> With its crystal tide forever
> Flowing by the throne of God?

As the line inched along, I watched carefully the stars before me. Pastor Glen placed his hand on the

individually bowed heads and murmured softly a prayer. He was short, and his face, waxy and smooth reminded me of the figures from the Banff Wax Museum.

It was my turn. I glanced up, too nervous even to smile. His small, pointed teeth were yellowed; his breath was sour with the smell of cigarettes. He touched my head.

"Close your eyes, kid," he said, on my behalf, to God.

Close up, Miss Velma's face was a lot older than I thought it should be and it was covered with pink pancake makeup that ended in a sharp line at her chin. The skin on her arms hung loosely and was covered with little red bumps. She accepted my dime to the overflowing offering plate without a glance.

> Yes, we'll gather at the river,
> The beautiful, the beautiful river,
> Gather with the saints at the river
> That flows by the throne of God

I stopped watching television on Monday nights after that. It sort of wasn't the same, once you'd seen them in real life.

I never bothered to mention to my parents that I had

been saved that night either. I had more or less decided that in the future any business I had with the Lord would be done direct.

Isabelle and Maryanne

The gymnasium really hadn't changed in twenty years. Light blue, concrete block walls rose high to a ceiling where fluorescent light bulbs shone from the safety of their wire cages. The hardwood floor was carefully marked with red, yellow and black lines indicating the various games still played in the room.

A white cloth banner stretched above the stage: 'Welcome Class of '70'. At the far end of the gym, the only other person in the room, the janitor, situated chairs and distributed ashtrays to the small tables lining the walls. Dozens of flower arrangements centered on the tables could not mask the lingering odor of thirty years worth of sweating adolescent boys and girls.

The pretty girls, the ones who didn't sweat, formed

the cheerleading squad. I pictured Maryanne Wilson and her six shrieking friends dancing around the basketball key in dark blue leotards and sweaters, and tiny white pleated skirts, shaking their massive, white pompoms in unison:

C-E-N-T-R-A-L!
Come on Central
Give 'em HELL!

The rest of us played basketball. Too short to play centre or guard, and too slow, really, for the foreward position I assumed, I stayed on the second string for my entire three years of high school.

Muffled noises from the Home Economics room adjacent to the gym indicated preparations were underway for the reunion banquet. I was embarrassingly early.

Maryanne's typewritten note, attached to my invitation said: "We're asking out-of-towners to take care of the guest book. Would you do the first shift, 6:00 to 6:30, during the cocktail hour? Thanks loads, Belle. See you there." Maryanne, still the head of all the committees, still the one in charge twenty years later.

"You're not allowed up on the veranda until I say." Maryanne marshalled us into a line at the bottom of the steps to see who was the tallest. It was her tenth birthday party and she had organized a game she invented called 'boyfriend-girlfriend'. She said height was important and that the tall girls would be the boyfriends and the short ones the girlfriends. Except for me. As the only girl in pants, it was only right, she said, that I should be a boy. As the boys, we were instructed to smoke candy cigarettes, swear a certain amount and kiss our girlfriends when Maryanne told us to. My girlfriend had chapped lips.

"This is a stupid game and I don't want to play," I said.

"Well, you have to go home then," said Maryanne. "I don't want you here anyway. I only invited you because my mom said."

I repented and was allowed to stay and play her game. Maryanne liked the bottle of cologne I'd given her.

I studied piano with Maryanne's mother every Tuesday night for ten years. Maryanne, who took lessons from a nun in Clarence, was at the same level. Her mother said she thought it best Maryanne take from someone else.

Every spring we travelled to Camrose for our practical exams. Maryanne got the higher marks although at the variety programs held in the community hall, where we both were invited to play, Maryanne said I was the one who never made mistakes. My father paid for my lessons with four dozen eggs a week and an invitation to Mrs. Wilson to maintain a garden on our farm. He agreed with Mrs. Wilson that what was important was not the marks but the music itself that we made.

Even the main corridor of the school seemed the same -- still haunted by the odors of old oranges and chalk dust. I wandered past the Canadian flag, the trophy cabinet, the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II and the painting of Mount Edith Cavell still hanging at an angle above the principal's office door. I remembered the girls' washroom: the same three sinks and wavy mirror that now reflected my fifty dollar hairdo, the same soap dispensors that never would squirt, the same three toilet cubicles, newly painted dusty rose.

"Did your mother cut your hair?" asked Leanne. Maryanne, she and the others chewed their gum and watched me struggling with the barrettes that I hoped would

disguise the horrible thing my mother had done to my head. "What does she do? Does she stick a bowl on your head or what, to get it so even around the bottom?"

"Geez, Leanne!" But Maryanne couldn't stop giggling. Maryanne, with her long blond hair and brand new sweater. I knew her. I knew the way she pretended to be your friend and care when noone else was around. I wanted to die at that moment, that first morning of grade eight.

"I have to pee," I said, pushing my way into the third cubicle and slamming the door.

"Oh, we'll wait for you!" laughed Leanne. "We want to watch you finish your hair."

They pretended to leave. I heard them, giggling, whispering and pointedly slamming the washroom door closed. I heard them sneaking back in; I could even see their stupid feet under the cubicle door.

Suddenly they began shouting and banging in rhythm on the walls:

Isabelle Schmidt's

Having a fit

Don't look now

She's taking a shit!

They ran out laughing and shrieking, leaving me alone and miserable. I removed the compass from my pencil

case and carefully carved, "I hate Maryanne Wilson", on the cubicle wall.

"I'm sorry, Belle, we were just trying to be funny," Maryanne said later.

The janitor had left by the time I returned to the gymnasium and the empty room waited, as I did, the fifteen minutes for the first guests to arrive. I removed a pen from my purse and opened the guest book. Name: Isabelle Schmidt. Occupation: Speech Therapist. There was no point in adding more; no marriage, no children no major delights or disasters.

Across the gym, next to the stage, a long table and bulletin board were covered with old high school memorabalia: a few basketball trophies, none of which I really helped to win, the old school mascot -- a dirty brown teddy bear we'd called Warp, a few photograph albums full of class pictures, candid shots of life around the school and one of Maryanne and me receiving an award on Music Night for our piano duet, 'Frankie and Johnnie'. There was even old clothing and jewellry pinned up for display. I recognized Maryanne's lime green and purple mini-skirt. Did they really wear them so short? Not me; I had been restricted to an inch above the

kneecap, no exceptions, my mother had said.

"You look like a geek," Maryanne said to me in the girls' washroom one morning at school and then showed me how to roll the waistband over and over to get the skirt length up to an acceptable level.

I fingered the large, purple, plastic earrings Maryanne's older sister brought back for her from Carnaby Street in London, the summer after our eleventh grade. Maryanne had been the first girl in the school to get her ears pierced. I wasn't allowed to. "If God had intended women to have two extra holes in their heads, He would of put them there to start with." My mother wasn't fussy about earrings of any kind. But Maryanne gave me all her old clip-ons anyway, the only earrings I ever had in high school.

I opened the blue and white yearbook, 'Central School Memories, 1970'. There we were in black and white, the Grand March, graduation night, over twenty years ago. Maryanne in her sleek, royal blue, velvet dress; the only girl in the group without an empire waistline. My dress was mauve chiffon, and as I recall, not pretty.

Maryanne, chief of the grad committee, had arranged

the march and set up all the partners. She chose Tony for herself, a boy she'd never dated, the only boy in the school, I'd confessed to her, that I really liked.

"Well, just because you like him doesn't mean he's yours," she had said and then matched me up with one of her old cast-offs.

She later married Tony, dropping out half way through nursing school and three months pregnant. I sometimes hoped they would have a terrible marriage.

"Isabelle!"

I turned to see the first arrivals, a dozen or so people, milling around the gymnasium doors. They were laughing and crowding around a woman in a wheelchair.

The woman was Maryanne.

I quickly looked at the others and felt my throat tighten.

"Hi!" I said too loudly. I waved and walked back to the guest table. Everyone was talking at once saying how good it was to be back, how we all looked just the same.

Maryanne sat smiling, still beautiful in her royal blue velvet dress. Tony's hands rested on her shoulders. I noticed he had put on some weight and was losing his hair.

"Belle! You were supposed to wear your grad dress

too!" Maryanne's arms quivered in her lap. I glanced away.

"Not likely! You remember how ugly it was." I struggled to smile and stumbled for words. "I didn't even want to wear it twenty years ago!"

"Well, you still look eighteen, anyway," she said.

"Lady Clairol," I smiled.

"Too bad they don't make a growth tonic too, hey Tony?" Maryanne laughed. "So how is it you've managed to stay single all these years, Isabelle?"

"Just never found a husband necessary, I guess."

Maryanne's hand jerked up, reaching for Tony's.

Maryanne and I sat on the front veranda of her house waiting for my Dad to pick me up after piano lessons.

"Are you going to the Spring Prom?" she asked.

"No. I don't have a date," I said.

"So what?" Maryanne carefully worked back the cuticle on a long, pink fingernail. "It's not like they won't let you in or anything, without a date."

"Yeah right, and I'll dance with myself all night too."

"Well, do you want a date?"

"No. And I don't want your help to find one."

Maryanane never had a steady boyfriend, she claimed she didn't want one, but she always had a date for any occasion that mattered.

"Okay, how about I don't go with anyone either then?" she paused and I said nothing. "For heaven's sake, Belle, a person doesn't have to have a boy around to have a good time," she said. "Even a bunch of us could go together! We could all go stag!"

And so, of course, we did. Five of the most popular girls in highschool, and me, arrived at the gym in Maryanne's Dad's car the night of the Spring Prom. It was, as Maryanne had predicted, quite sensational.

"Wait everyone!" I said, turning away from Tony and Maryanne. The others had begun to move into the gym. "You've all got to come back and sign in the guest book."

Tony maneuvered Maryanne away from the table. The corner of the tablecloth caught in the wheel of her chair and sent a vase of sweet peas crashing to the floor.

"Oh God!" I rushed to her side. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, of course I am. Don't make a big deal out of it, all right? It's not the end of the world."

I crouched to pick up the glass while Tony went looking for a broom. I could feel Maryanne's eyes burning

my back.

"Look at me, Belle."

I noticed a drop of blood on my thumb.

"Isabelle," she pushed at me.

I turned towards her, still crouching, and felt the tears running down my cheeks. Her eyes are so blue, I thought, the same beautiful, fierce blue.

"I've got M.S. I'm not dead yet. And I don't need you going around here thinking I am. Do you understand?"

CHAPTER III

Teaching Memories in Fiction

When I began teaching school I had no inkling that like good friendships the memories of relationships with some of my students would remain so powerfully with me. They are precious memories.

The following three stories reflect such very special relationships that all teachers can come to know.

Gone to Heaven

A plump dark-haired child stood at the end of the sidewalk in my front yard, sucking an icecream cone. Although it was a cool day at the end of August, she wore bright yellow shorts exposing thick, dimpled thighs that prevented her knees from touching. From my perch on the front step I didn't recognize her and after a glance, returned to my newspaper.

"We just moved in and I'm going to school here next week." Her voice was loud, whining, and cut my concentration.

I glanced up. "Really? Are you going to the elementary school on the hill?"

"Yes," she paused. "And my mom gave me five dollars today!" She held up a brown paper bag. "I spent it all on

candy."

I watched as she shovelled the last of the cone into her mouth and slumped her back down against the fencepost. She began rubbing her sticky hands back and forth on the lawn, attracting little bits of dried grass to her fingertips which she then held away from her body, spread out, as though waiting for nail polish to dry.

"I'll be in grade five," she said.

"Well, I teach grade five!. I wonder if you will be in my class?" I folded the paper and stood to go inside. "Would you like to come in and wash your hands?" She followed me through the house to the kitchen, skirting around Ace who was sprawled, tail wagging, on the floor.

"Does your dog bite?" she asked.

"No. He's pretty friendly." I ran some water in the kitchen sink and handed her a bar of soap. She swished her hands back and forth, the bits of grass floating to the surface.

"My dog Buffy's dead and gone to Heaven. He got hit by a car." She concentrated on her hands and rubbed vigorously with the soap.

"It would be sad to lose your dog. I know I would sure miss Ace if he died."

"Oh no! He's lucky! Buffy's lucky cause he got to go

to Heaven and be with God." She accepted the towel I offered and slowly rubbed her fingers. "God takes some home early. Some have to wait till Jesus comes back." She extended the towel back to me in her pudgy hand. "When Jesus gets here and sees what a big mess everything is, He's going to be plenty mad. There'll be yelling and screaming and a whole bunch of people will have to go to Hell. My dog's lucky cause he doesn't have to be here for all that. And that's sure the truth."

"You could be right," I said.

I followed her to the front door and we said our good-byes. I watched her stump down the steps and cross the sidewalk to the fencepost where she retrieved her candy bag. "My name's Stephanie!" she yelled, walking and tugging at the legs of her panties which had crawled up mercilessly high under the tight yellow shorts. "See you in school!"

She arrived the first day of school wearing a fussy pink dress and carrying a lunch kit stuffed with potato chips and candy and a note from her mother:

Dear Mrs. Alberg,

> Stepanie's Jehovah's Witness and is to be excluded from the saying of the Lord's Prayer and the singing of Oh Canada in the mornings. And she can't take part in singing songs to do with the holidays. She also can't go to the school parties and whatnot. We don't believe in it.
>
> Mrs. Victor Gibbs

"Anyone who plays with me can have a candy." Stephanie announced, eyeing the others at first recess. They took advantage of the treat, but abandoned her halfway through the break.

She was the last one picked for the noon hour ball game. "It's a stupid game and I wouldn't play anyway because of my good dress."

She was petulant, petty and provoked the worst in the other children. They came to link her obesity to her name. Stephanie evolved into Fanny, then Fat Fanny, and eventually, Fat Ass Fanny.

Stephanie, the only Jehovah's Witness in school, had few qualities that endeared her to the other students. She wasn't nice, she wasn't fun, she wasn't clever, she wasn't athletic, and to defend herself, she developed a

shrillness that others found annoying and mean.

She often stayed after school to clean the blackboards, water the plants, or help carry my books home. "I don't like walking home with those stupid kids anyway." Stephanie answered when I asked if she wouldn't rather be on her way with the others.

On Saturday mornings, she began waiting at my front door for me to come out and pick up my newspaper. She would come in for breakfast ("Toast only, please.") and insist on helping to do the dishes. She got permission from her mother to accompany Ace and me on our weekend hikes to the ravine on the edge of town.

At such times as those, her protective armour remained at home and her gentle openness returned.

"Did you always want to be a teacher, Mrs. Alberg?" We splashed through the dry, crackling aspen leaves, on the ravine floor.

"No, not really. I changed my mind lots of times before I finally decided. What would you like to be, Stephanie?"

She heaved a stick for Ace and plunged her fingers, cold from the October wind, deep into her coat pockets. "My Mom said I can't be a nurse so I guess I'll maybe work in a store before I get married."

The dried twigs cracked under our feet and the first snowflakes of the season began to flutter around us.

"Why can't you be a nurse if you want to?"

"Well!" She sighed with a child's exasperation. "We're not really supposed to keep on going to school after graduation. My Mom says it makes people get too many ideas and they get too big for their pants."

She ran ahead after Ace, through the aspen and willow trees. "It's snowing!" she shrieked.

I caught up to her sitting on the bank of the creek. Ace was stretched out panting by her side. "Look! You can see Ace and my's breath!" She pointed her face up. "Haaaaa," she breathed out.

"Haaaaa," I added. Over and over we exhaled and laughed and studied the misty clouds our breath made and tried to catch the snowflakes on our tongues.

"This is the best day," she said.

"It is," I agreed.

The week before Christmas was a frigid one. At the final buzzer and after a miserable outdoor recess, the students pressed and shoved through the doors to escape the cold to the inside.

"Why do we do this to these kids?" I asked a

colleague as he and I reached to hold back the double doors for the students. "It's thirty-five below!"

"School policy says forty," he smiled and turned for the comfort of his classroom.

"Stop pushing!" I yelled as the freezing wind bit my bare arms and ankles. I watched Stephanie crumble against the outside wall. "Someone's hurt! Get out of the way.!" I forced my way through the oncoming students. She hadn't moved.

"Stephanie, are you all right?" I rolled her onto her back, flat on the cold cement walk. Her limbs spread awkwardly around her body.

"Stephanie?" I felt for her pulse. There was no breath from her face.

"Stephanie!" I tilted her head back, forced open her mouth and pinched her nose. "Haaaaa." I breathed into her.

"Stephanie." I listened.

I pushed my breath into her lungs again and again, rythmically, steadily, calling her name so softly over and over.

"Stephanie." Again and again.

Someone put a coat over my shoulders. People were running around and shouting and talking.

"Haaaaa." Steadily, surely, over and over. "Haaaaa."

I know the moment she left.

I knew when she died. I began to watch the feeble escape of my own breaths from her lungs. But I could not stop.

The ambulence arrived and the doctor pronounced Stephanie dead.

It was over.

I remembered my other students and made my way back to a classroom of frightened and crying children.

Two weeks after the funeral, the note arrived at the school:

Dear Mrs. Alberg,

Thanks very much for your bringing the good cake for lunch after the funeral.

The doctor told us Stephanie had a tumor inside her head for a long time. It was way bigger than a walnut, he said. It didn't have to do with her bumping her head against the school wall or anything.

She's gone to Heaven now. We thank God

every day for saving her from all this misery on earth and for taking her to be with our Lord Jesus himself.

Mrs. Victor Gibbs

In Care

The ear aches all the time and still has no hearing. He cleans a patch on the foggy bathroom mirror and stares over his shoulder. The beating marks show like lattice fencing on his brown back or like a fingerpainting gone to mud and you use your fingernails to scrape away the goop to the paper beneath. Lorenz gently probes his ribs and breathes a deep breath. The places where the boot hit don't show anymore.

"Nearly bedtime, Lorenz. You about done in there?" Harvey banging on the door, shouting. "Maybe you want a bedtime snack or something?"

Shouting, but it's okay shouting. Big men have big voices says Beatrice. He's allowed to call his sister once a week, on Sundays. Today he told her it's safe and

clean at Harvey and Anne's. He said his foster parents have him feed the chickens every morning and clean the barn at night. Beatrice said it's good to work when you have good food. Yes, he told her, the food was good and lots. But the best part, he said, was Tip, Harvey's new black dog.

Lorenz opens the bathroom door.

"Thought maybe you'd drowned or something. So quiet in there." Harvey smiles from the hallway.

Later in the darkness, with the coyotes crying goodnight, Lorenz shifts to his back on the squeaky bed and tugs awkwardly at the legs of his pyjamas. Pyjamas, Beatrice says, you've got to get used to them. Besides, it makes it warmer when you sleep at night in those cold sheets.

Harvey takes Lorenz to the school the next day, the second week of November. He sits on a metal chair outside the principal's office while Harvey tells her all about him. Harvey will tell her about the prize in art and that he likes sports. Lorenz worries that he will tell the principal that he failed grade five and that his Dad's a drunk.

Two boys walk towards him. "You the new foster kid?"

Lorenz stares down and says nothing, in case he answers wrong. "Can you play hockey, or what?" The boy pokes at Lorenz' chair with his foot. "We got a rink outside here and everything. If you can play, you're on Gerry's team for noons. He's Gerry. I'm David."

"I can play." Lorenz glances up quickly. "I'm Lorenz."

Mrs. Forrest is old, and round, and soft. Lorenz sits beside her at the big desk and shows her his new pencils and notebooks that Linda, the social worker, gave him. She tells him to pick the colour he likes best for his journal. She tells him that every day they write or draw things in it, first thing in the morning. Mrs. Forrest says he can hand it in every day if he wants to, and she will read it and write back to him about what he puts there. Lorenz decides to wait two days before handing it in.

"I talked to two people about you this morning, Lorenz." Her voice is gentle and low. Lorenz lets her touch his hand. "Linda explained to me about the troubles you had at home, about breaking the windows in the hockey rink and why you are now with us at Clear River School. She said you were a good student but that you missed a

lot of school last year." She pauses and puts his hand inside both of hers. They are warm, and shiney, and white. "She said to keep an eye out for you because you are very special."

"I also spoke to your sister Beatrice." Beatrice is the best person. They won't let him live with her now because she isn't old enough; she is seventeen. But Beatrice says when she finishes high school and gets a job, they might. Beatrice is smart.

"I was very sorry to hear of your mother dying last year Lorenz, and how hard it was for you and your Dad." Lorenz pulls his hand from Mrs. Forrest and pushes back on his chair. "Beatrice told me that your Dad was very sad and drank a lot. She told me that he sometimes hurt you."

The tears push against the eyelids. He squints tight the eyes but still they push, over the lashes, and down to the chin. He tucks his hands tight under his armpits and touches the tender spot, the boot spot. He senses Mrs. Forrest coming close and crouching at his chair. Her hand touches the tears on his chin.

"I did not want to make you feel sad, Lorenz. But I thought you should know that I understand what has happened to you and why you broke the windows. You are

safe here now, with us."

Mrs. Forrest holds Lorenz close to her shoulder. It has a lady smell, of clean things and lilac bushes.

On Sunday night, Lorenz calls Beatrice on the phone. He tells her that next to Gerry, he is the best hockey player in the school. He is now one of the noon captains. He says that because he is the tallest, he gets to be Santa Claus in the school Christmas play. He tells Beatrice that Mrs. Forrest has taught him how to draw eggs that look like real eggs with the shading and all. He says that Harvey never gets mad at him and that he even lets him be in charge of Tip. Tip is a real smart dog and waits outside the chicken coop while Lorenz feeds them and gets the eggs. Lorenz tells Beatrice everything is okay.

Sometimes in his journal he writes sentences and sometimes he draws pictures for Mrs. Forrest. He loves the journal and the words Mrs. Forrest puts there. He drew a picture of his mother's grave and one big one of Tip and the chickens. Mrs. Forrest wrote that Tip looked like a very handsome dog and that he had the shading just right.

Tip walks Lorenz to the end of the lane every morning and waits with him till the bus arrives. He's there at night too, when the bus comes home. Harvey jokes that Lorenz has taught Tip to read time. Tip understands a lot of things. He understands when Lorenz misses his Mom because Tip has no Mom either.

On Tuesday, Tip isn't there to meet Lorenz when he gets off the bus. He decides that Tip just forgot the time. He calls and whistles. He sees Harvey with no coat on, waiting for him on the front porch. Tip is not there.

In the kitchen Harvey says that he has some bad news. "Tip killed fourteen of the chickens today, Lorenz. Someone, now I'm saying it doesn't matter who at this point, left open the gate to the chicken coop this morning. Tip got in and killed fourteen of them. I had to get rid of him, Lorenz."

Lorenz knows who left open the gate. He remembers doing the chores with Tip and after feeding the chickens he remembers the race they had all the way to the feed shed with the pails banging against his boots and Tip barking all the way. He remembers the open gate.

"We couldn't keep him around anymore. Once a dog gets the taste of chicken blood, you can't teach him

otherwise. I had to shoot him, Lorenz, he wouldn't be no good to anyone if he kills chickens."

It was almost dark when Linda, the social worker, and Mrs. Forrest found him at the cemetery.

"I thought we might find you here." Mrs. Forrest spoke quietly and knelt beside him at his mother's grave. She hugged him tightly and Lorenz could see she was crying. "Are you cold?" she asked.

He sat between them in the car. It was warm and Mrs. Forrest held his hand between her soft ones. He saw the blur of the weeds as the headlights swept by the ditch on the road to town.

"You broke them all, Lorenz. Why did you have to break every single one?" Linda asked. Harvey had a big red barn with eighteen separate windows. Lorenz broke every one of them. "Do you understand what this means?" She asked.

Lorenz understood that when he broke the windows in the hockey rink everything turned right. It meant they took his Dad away and put him in safe with Harvey and Anne and Mrs. Forrest. He understood that Tip was gone and it was his fault and he wanted Tip to come back.

"It means you can't go back to Harvey's. You can't live there anymore, Lorenz." Linda paused. "You hitchhiked thirty miles to Berry Lake and left Harvey driving all over the countryside, worried sick, looking for you." Lorenz said nothing.

"You can't go back there, I've got all your things here in the car."

Lorenz felt sleepy. His eyes were gritty and heavy in the warm car. His head slid towards Mrs. Forrest's fuzzy coat.

Mrs Forrest spoke quietly. "Lorenz could come and live with me." Lorenz knew he would like that. Mrs. Forrest had two cats and a dog, and her husband was dead. He would take care of Mrs. Forrest.

"That isn't possible, Mrs. Forrest. Lorenz is a ward of the province." Linda stared straight ahead at the road. "Until he's sixteen years old, Social Services decides who he lives with."

"Then you people just make the decision that he lives with me and continues at our school,"

"We have to follow the rules. People don't seem to understand that." Lorenz did not like what Linda said. "Mrs. Forrest, you're a widow. Lorenz must be placed in a family environment with a good male role model. If a

foster child doesn't adjust properly or fit into one home, he is removed and placed in another area altogether. Tonight he goes to a temporary home in town. He will be permanently placed as soon as possible. I can't change that."

"Wasn't Harvey's a permanent placement?" Mrs. Forrest asked.

"They are only permanent placements so long as they work out. They aren't permanent permanent."

"Why is it," Mrs. Forrest paused, her voice shaking, "a foster child is not forgiven, like other children?"

From the crest of the hill, the town lights shone in the distance, some five miles, some five minutes away. His eyes fell once more to the warm hands gently holding his.

Letters From Larry: 1987-1992

November 1, 1987

Dear Ms Appleby,

You said to write so here goes nothing.

These two stamps from Mexico I'm sending you because I have no use for them and you might. I got them from our neighbour who gave them to me.

Our volleyball team's started practicing noons. We got a tournament at J.S. Cartwright School in three weeks. Mr. Sandahl's just like you that we have to do all the stretches before we can play. And because we're the grade 8's, we have to put all the equipment away. I liked it better with everybody taking turns. Also he shouts all

the time.

Nothing's much new here at Clear River except Wendy Carpenter got married last weekend and everybody went. They had a dance in the gym and somebody threw up outside just where everybody walks. And now it's frozen there till spring.

Well, that's about it. We don't do journals anymore so I'm writing to you instead.

Your old student,

Larry

January 2, 1988

Dear Ms Appleby,

Thanks for writing. Sorry I took so long to write back. The thing is I've been really busy. School's really bad too. Mr. Sandahl got sick beginning of December for a few weeks. We've had two subs who don't know anything. They even cancelled the Christmas concert. Not that we'd practiced or anything. Our cattle got sick and I missed three days of school helping Dad. That was about the best

thing. No school!! Do you think you'll move back to Clear River and teach again? How come you went back to university if you're already a teacher? My aunt said you were likely bored living here. Is that right? What's it like in Edmonton, anyway? Do you still take your dog Boo skiing or do you have to keep him in the yard in the city? It's boring here. I bet you're glad you left.

from,

Larry Radway

February 28, 1988

Dear Ms Appleby,

You write back fast! I'm a lot slower and was going to wait even longer to write except tonight I've got nothing better to do (Ha! Ha!). You were right about Mr. Sandahl. He still shouts sometimes but we're having a curling bonspiel this coming weekend and he's invited the other school teams. He's not playing though.

You're just the same saying that you have to keep learning things all your life. Is university really

interesting or is it just more people telling you what you have to do all the time and not letting you read what you want? We don't have free reading time this year like in grade seven.

Mrs. Wilson's got cancer and isn't at school anymore. My Dad said she taught grade one and two for about thirty-five years. She even taught him. She's my favourite teacher just like you.

I'm glad you miss us. Plus I'm glad Boo and you get to go out and run free at the river like you did here. We've got so much snow here it's not even funny. I'm learning how to make a new pair of snowshoes. Yesterday I walked six hours on my trapline.

Well, bye for now.

Your friend,

Larry

April 25, 1988

Dear Ms Appleby,

Thanks for the picture of you and Boo. Your hair

isn't short anymore. Here's one of me my mom took at Christmas with my new dog Sherlock. He's sort of a Lab. He's a good dog and smart. I named him Sherlock like you named Boo, after a character in a good book. I read that book you said, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and I think Boo Radley is a good character to name your dog after. Sherlock's after the detective because I want him to be smart and sniff things out just like Sherlock Holmes does.

Mrs. Wilson's really, really sick and very skinny, but I went over to see her. She told me that I brought her a frog once to school and we named him Pep before we took him back to the river. I remember that. She said to tell you the plant you gave her last summer won't stop blooming. I remember Mrs. Wilson used to draw lots of pictures for us in our books instead of just writing.

We graduate this school on June 30 and next year for grade nine go in to town for the rest of it. Will you be able to come to our ceremony or not? We're having food and presentations and everything. Dad said it takes about six hours driving time from Edmonton, so I guess it would be quite a drive. Also maybe you have other things you have to do.

Anyways, I've started running after school, training

for the trackmeet again, like last year. You said you never made us do it, you just "encouraged" us (Ha! Ha!).

See you later.

Your old student,

Larry

P.S. I didn't mean to bug you that time last year when your plants all fell off on the floor and broke.

June 10, 1988

Dear Ms Appleby,

Ha! So now you know what it's like to sit and listen for an hour and a half with no break to a boring teacher. And you're even writing exams! You always said you didn't like exams when you went to school. Well, I hope you do really well because you're a smart teacher and it's not fair if they just give you an exam and expect you to say everything you need to say in just two hours. That's how I feel about it. But I hope you did really well for your master's exams.

I'm glad you are coming to our graduation. Everybody said to say hi and that we hope you will make a speech for us at our graduation. It doesn't have to be anything fancy. Just say some things about us and when you were here. I think everybody was glad we were in your class before you left. Please write and let me know.

Bernie got a motorcycle. Darrel is going to hockey school in Saskatoon this summer.

Mrs. Wilson's funeral was on Saturday.

They said she died on Wednesday. Some of us kids went. It was in the gym. My brother came from Regina. I don't know who they'll get for a new teacher. Maybe the sub will stay. All Mrs. Wilson's geraniums are still in her class. I went in there yesterday and counted that there was twenty-one of them. That's how many kids were in her class.

I'll see you on June 30.

from,

Larry

October 14, 1988

Dear Ms Appleby,

Grade nine is okay. There are as many kids in grade nine in town as were in our whole school. There's three classes of us. I have six different teachers. It's really different. Bernie is not my friend really anymore. We just ride the bus together. He thinks he's so cool and he just hangs around with a bunch that are getting into trouble all the time. He's not the same. We don't do any of the same things. Deanna goes out with a grade twelve guy. My Mom said it's just trouble.

I made the volleyball team. Dad said to go ahead and give it a shot and if I made the team he'd take me to the games. I can't believe I made the team there are so many good players here. You wouldn't believe how much gym equipment we've got and science is in a real science room.

Sherlock is learning all kinds of new tricks. For instance, in the mornings he barks outside my bedroom window till I get up and then as soon as I come to the window he runs to the back door and waits for me to feed him breakfast. How's Boo? Does he still make you take him on trecherous treks? (alliteration)

Write soon.

Your old student,

Lovable Larry (Ha!)

December 18, 1988

Dear Ms Appleby,

This is just a card to wish you a Merry Christmas and to thank you for writing.

It's about forty below and the animals are sure suffering. Chores are a real pain in the .....

We're having our school dance on Friday night. Darrel's Dad is driving us in.

Well, I hope you are fine and Happy New Year.

Sincerely,

Larry

May 12, 1989

Dear Ms Appleby,

I'm sorry I haven't written for so long. I think today is your birthday, isn't it? Well, I hope it's a good one. We started training for track again. We won the zone finals in volleyball. Not much else is new. We're building new corrals. Darrel and I hope to go on a canoe trip down the Waterhen when school's out if our dads say. Are you coming north this summer?

Well, I gotta do chores so I better close. Hope you are fine.

Sincerely,

Larry

December 20, 1989

Dear Ms Appleby,

Well, you're right, I haven't written for a long time but don't worry, I'm fine. Thank you for the Christmas card.

High school's not as different as I thought it would be. There's just way more people. The classes are about

an hour and a half long and some of the teachers don't even know your name yet. I'm taking biology, phys ed, math and law this term. I'm getting all 80s and 90s. I'm also playing pretty well all the sports. This year Darrel and me are aiming for the provincials in curling. We haven't picked the other two yet. I'd be skipping.

I've got three of my own cows this year and I hope in the spring, three new calves. Mom and Dad said I have to keep saving for university. I decided not to save for a car even though I'll be getting my license in March.

Except for Darrel, I don't do much with the other kids from Clear River anymore. There's only four of us left from our class that ride the bus. Deanna quit school. You probably heard that Bernie rolled his Mom's car on the lake road last summer. He's still wearing this big metal rig around his head to keep his neck straight. It's screwed right into his head. I guess he broke his neck but he can still walk. He skipped school all the time anyway but I don't know if he's coming back when his neck gets better. We used to be best friends but not anymore.

Well, I'm glad you are liking Edmonton. I can't wait to get to university and see what it's like to live in the city.

Write soon. Even if I don't write back between times, I like getting your letters.

Merry Christmas (late!),

Larry

June 10, 1992

Dear Ms Appleby,

Will wonders never cease, hey? I know you haven't heard from me for ages and I'm sorry I'm such a terrible letter writer. I sent you a Christmas card last year but I used your old address and it was returned. By the time I got it back it was the end of January and I thought it would look pretty stupid sending a Christmas card then!

I'm writing this for a few reasons. First, of course, is to say hello and that I hope you, Bob and Boo are still well. Next, is to invite you to our high school graduation June 25. We're allowed six invitations and I'm inviting my parents, my grandma and grandpa and my brother. I was thinking last night of who else would I like to invite. I thought of you. I hope you can come.

When I started in your class in grade seven I didn't like school too much and I wasn't exactly a good student. I don't know how or why but I really liked school that year. I wanted to do well.

This summer I'm going to work for Dad then start engineering at U of S in September. I've got three scholarships. I'm the first person in my family to go to university. Thank you for helping me. I hope you can come to the celebrations.

Love,

Larry

CHAPTER IV

Reflections

These stories are me. They are times I lived or seemed to live or wished I had lived. They are based on real events and people or are the seeds taken from the real, and nourished and developed into stories I remember as shaping my character and values. They reflect special memories of childhood and teaching that will always be me.

The woman whose lonely and sad existence gave rise to my character Ma Chang in *Black Cafe White* did not break her arm one hot August evening in the early sixties, although as a child I saw the terrible bruises put on her face by her husband. She did move away and I never learned where.

My parents did go to Europe when I was four years old but my real uncle was not dead when I lived in the spring of 1957. *Sweet Time* was written in memory of the

enlightening, comforting and sweet times I shared with my Aunt Lily in the magical beauty of the Neutral Hills.

Indeed, I was saved by a roving evangelist just like the child in *Saved on a Saturday Night* but I'm not sure, was it 1962?

I was not a woman who found a friend in a velvet graduation dress at her twentieth-year class reuniun although I share characteristics and experiences with both Isabelle and Maryanne in my story, *Isabelle and Maryanne*. I did have an older sister who brought back earrings from Carnaby Street in London and it's true, I did play second string basketball all my high school years.

Lorenz, the foster child of the story *In Care*, grew from the lives of two boys I once taught.

Gone to Heaven is my expression of the death of a child I had grown to cherish.

One of the greatest rewards of my teaching has come from keeping in touch with certain students long after they have left my classroom. Students, naturally, get on with their lives, but some among them, almost inexplicably, maintain a connection. It might be consistent -- letters for a few years or a yearly Christmas card -- but more often it comes with delightful

surprise as in a wedding picture or birth announcement. Some, like the character Larry in *Letters From Larry: 1987-1992*, invite you to share their achievments. And it is sweet joy.

Why would I choose to fictionalize real events and people apart from the obvious -- respect for others' privacy? Can fiction justifiably be called autobiography? And what place might such stories of learning and teaching have in the world of education?

It is my contention that all autobiographical writing is, in a sense, fiction. The memories of events, people, places, and conversations are selective and cloud with time. These stories might be perceived as happy, sad, funny, serious, lonely or comforting -- feelings and emotions that are part of the lives of us all. By writing and sharing our stories we come to a better understanding of ourselves and of our relationships with our students, our colleagues, our friends and our families.

In the end what might be most important to both readers and writers of autobiographically-based stories is not the fact or fiction in the writing but the universal themes, images and understandings that evolve.

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